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Religion & Violence—Postmodern Perceptions

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Theoretical Position of Post-modernim

Before we discuss the postmodern discourse about violence & religion, it seems better to have a clear picture of theoretical positions on the background scenario of the post modernism itself. A thorough study of chronological sequence reveals that the Postmodernism is a corollary to Modernization & Radicalism, in 20th century.

Modernization Theory (Late 40's until the mid 60's) characterized, the inevitability of progress, the invincibility of science, and the desirability of liberal democracy. Nothing was considered higher than human reason; secular was preferred to religious & the rights of the individual were focused.

The Radicals (Late 60's until the late 70's) re-defined the modern, inverted the previous binary code; emphasizing repressive nature of Modernity; suspected its claims of being rational and liberating; considered capitalist democracy as source of alienation & marginalization. Therefore, they emphasized the public, the heroic, the collective and universal, and coined grand narratives of the struggle against capitalism and imperialism.

In the Post-modern Theory (Late 70's until the present), the qualities of Radical Theory were cast under suspicion. The post-modernists claimed that the difference, hybridism, heterogeneity and restless mobility were native to a capitalist global society, which focuses a consumer who is mobile, ephemeral and constituted by unstable desires(1). Therefore, postmodernism praises the playful, the hybrid, the contingent, and of a multiple, diffuse, and de-centered self.

According to Frederic Jameson, modernism and postmodernism are cultural formations that accompany particular stages of capitalism. The first stage- market capitalism (eighteenth to late nineteenth centuries) with particular technological developments (the steam-driven motor for example) is associated with a particular kind of aesthetics & that is realism. The second phase, monopoly capitalism (late nineteenth century until the mid-twentieth century) is associated with electric and internal combustion motors, and with modernism. The third, the phase we are in now, is multinational or consumer capitalism, with the emphasis placed on marketing, selling, and consuming commodities, associated with nuclear and electronic technologies, and correlated with postmodernism(2).

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Thus, Postmodernism rejects grand-narratives, favors mini-narratives that explain small practices, local events, rather than universal truths & concepts. It is an "incredulity towards metanarratives (*grandes histories*)" and emergence of "micronarratives (*petites histories*)" as Lyotard puts forward(3). These mini-narratives are situational, provisional, contingent and temporary, making no claim to universality, truth or reason.

In the past, cultural and religious knowledge and value was controlled by the intellectual and political elite; parents: children, teachers: students, clergy: followers, politicians: citizens, and so on. Satellite television networks & the web-culture have made both censorship and control obsolete; "the status of knowledge is altered as societies enter what is known as the postindustrial age and cultures enter what is known as the postmodern age." (Lyotard, 1993) The communication fabrics have created an information superhighway leading to an intellectual free market where knowledge and values are diffused throughout the global society.

Postmodern perceptions about Religion & violence:

David Lyon's phrase "Jesus in Disneyland" (4) gives the best picture of religion in postmodern times. Post- modernity seems to believe in a private & domestic religion rather than allowing a universal Truth, based upon some grand-narratives.

Modernity rejected religion as being irrational & unreliable and preferred secularist democracy as the new religion for the whole world. Postmodernity, on the other hand, is a movement towards "Un-secularization of the world" says George Weigel; quoted by Samuel Huntington, June 1993(5). There seems to be a direct relationship between the decline of modernism and the rise of traditional religions.

Bauman asserts that "postmodernity can be seen as restoring to the world what modernity had taken away, ------ So now we have the old gods coming back"(6). In this situation, Gabriel Moran expresses caution; "Is the postmodern world a return to the pre-modern world?"(7).

However, the religion is changing its nature in the postmodern age. For postmodernists, every society is in a state of constant change; there are no absolute values, only relative ones; nor are there any absolute truths. According to this thesis, ethical laws are shaped by the cultural context of a particular time, place and community. Thus, the religion is now an entirely human-made phenomenon; created, altered and renewed; there is no one 'right' or 'wrong' religion. This promotes the value of individual religious impulses and weakens the strength of traditional 'religions'.

This brief survey presents a view of the postmodern perception about the religion. It is not necessarily true that all scholars in the modern age have postmodern view of Religion; they try to look deep into the philosophy &

practice of a religion, as well. Therefore, we can discover the relationship between religion & violence in the light of their analysis. Before having a brief survey & analyzing the opinions of modern scholarship about religious violence, it is better to define violence, its forms & manifestations.

What is violence? The answer to this question is tricky one because the meaning of the word violence, always depends upon the context of its use as well as the social norms of a society or a culture in which it is being understood or being used.

The source & the target of violence may be an individual or a group & the vice versa. Consequently, the each party with reference to its own context & interest will determine the meaning. One of the glaring examples of our times is the two post-modern characters of George W. Bush & Usama Bin Laden. According to one definition of violence, they are brutal to each other & as per other definition; they are heroes of their own communities.

Therefore, John R Hall points out that: "Defining violence has long been a vexed problem, and it is only exacerbated for a culturally freighted phenomenon like religion." One of the very important historian theorists of our times goes further saying that, "Of all the vogue words of the late 1960s, "violence" is very nearly the trendiest and the most meaningless. Everyone talks about it, nobody thinks about it"(8). However, for the convenience of our understanding, we have to resort to a definition.

According to the literal explanations, it is a behavior/ response/ reaction involving physical force intended to hurt, damage, or kill someone or something, a turbulent stage of human mind & body resulting in injuries & destruction. Jerald Priestland, rightly analyzes that "the essence of violence" is the "*physical* power" which is "deliberately employed"(9). Keeping in view, this key concept about violence, one has to differentiate between numerous forms of violence.

It is obvious that, violence is not an ambiguous straightjacket or vague idea popularized; rather it is complex phenomenon having different manifestations & demonstrations in the world. Ariarajah explains violence under the following classifications:

- physical violence, which expresses itself in killings, massacres, genocides and other forms of blood-letting
- structural violence, where the very social, political, cultural structures oppress, discriminate, exclude or marginalize groups of people
- economic violence, where the economic life is organized in a way that denies even the very basic needs of people to live in dignity
- social violence, where forces like racism and sexism exclude peoples on the basis of color, gender, caste, ethnicity, etc

- domestic violence, where women and children are abused or treated brutally within established relationships
- psychological violence, where persons or groups of persons in an institution, or in a society in general, are kept intimidated and live in fear
- moral violence, where the brutal force of the state or a dominant group denies people's human rights or their right to people-hood itself(10).

That gives a comprehensive analysis of different forms of violence. The studies further show that, if the source of violence is individual, the following may be the reasons behind this behavior: Genetics, Personality disorders, Drinking & drug addiction, Social Modeling or a Conditioned Behavior.
The manifestation of this behavior on a large scale or on an institution level may be in the form of a response or reaction originating from human jealousy, revenge, fear or hatred, retaliation against a structured tyranny or oppression, and it may be in the guise of a strife & struggle, against any invasion of thought, culture or a territory.

These studies are very much clear in their results that religion is not only the reason behind any act of violence; it might be one of the many!
Apart from the selective & pejorative use of the label fundamentalism, the fact remains that postmodern phenomenon of violence has been ascribed to religion by George W. Bush by declaring his war "Crusade" & by Bin Laden declaring his reaction to this war a "Jihad". This assertion leads to the fact that all recent violent activities like 9/11, War on Terror, Palestinian-Israel clashes & wars in Iraq & Afghanistan, all have links to religion. Even the cold war era, in this sense, was a conflict between Capitalist Christianity & an anti-God Communist regime.

Keeping in view this perspective, the basic question arises 'Does religion incite violence?' Can it be believed that Islam literally meaning peace with the Prophet of Mercy, Christianity with its Catholicism & Christ's extra-ordinary tolerance, Judaism with the Decalogue ensuring civilized behavior and Hinduism with its element of nonviolence Ahinsa', motivate people to be violent? The answer is certainly not! There are some other hidden factors to be discovered & to be brought to light.

Social researches show almost consensus over the fact that all religions de-emphasize violence but post-modern studies analyze the story in different scenario. Juergensmeyer cites latest research, confirming the notion that there has been a rise in worldwide religious violence, since last decades(11). The result is very unfortunate; religion seems to be peace, in theory but violence in practice.

At the same time, one must be cautious enough to deal with the puzzling phrase of religious- violence. John R. Hall (2001) rightly puts forward: In order to better understand the myriad relationships between

religion and violence, it is important to try to distinguish between specifically religious violence and violence that may have religious dimensions, but can be better explained in other terms.

Keeping in view this canvas as background, the post-modern perceptions seem to have two extreme angles to look at the phenomenon of religious violence. The two schools of thought as follow:

1. Religion is the main source of violence.
2. To consider Religion as a main source of violence is a myth.

In the next part of this paper, we will critically evaluate the same two notions. Let us take up the notion that there exists an intrinsic relationship between religion and violence, and then move forward with an analysis of the arguments, presented in favor of this concept, one by one:

1. The belief, in the eternal struggle between good and evil or God and the Devil, divides people into religious & secular; it makes religious people belligerent- leading to violence in the name of religion.

Can we deny the existence of the strife between good & evil in the world? Is it something new, artificially created by religion? Does this struggle not exist between the law enforcement agencies & the lawbreakers in any state or society? Is religion the only reason behind division in the society? The answer to all these questions is a big NO! Certainly, many other passions & motives make human beings belligerent.

An important question in this regard naturally arises that, whether the concept of chosen or higher people is associated only to religion, or there are some other superiority complexes as well, which more strongly & severely takes this hard-line stance. Everyone may count numerous examples, regarding this superiority syndrome based on nationalistic & racial chauvinism.

The matter of fact is that if isolate the religion from ethnicity and nationalism, the link between religion and violence decreases. When religion is ethicized and connected with state, nation or ethnicity, the potential for violence greatly increases.

There is another aspect, points out Cavanaugh: When we examine academic arguments that religion causes violence, we find that what does or does not count as religion is based on subjective and indefensible assumptions. As a result, certain kinds of violence are condemned, and others are ignored(12) No religion, in principle promotes violence. The emotional attachment to any dogma really matters. The belief of self-righteousness becomes the driving force behind any aggressive movement. A nation or a social group, when charged with overwhelming urge of political & economic interests, lead by chauvinistic ruling elite, confront any society, they use religion as a tool & as a motivating force to materialize the evil craze. The burden of exploitation is put on religion's shoulders & hence it seems to be the source of violence.

2. The Scriptures preach violence in the form of punishment from God, in war and conquest, and as part of religious duty. Religiously justified violence suggests there are ties between the sacred and the violent(13).

The Scriptures mention violence, when it comes to the law & code of conduct. The main theme of a scripture is to announce good tidings for those who abide by the social laws & detail punishments for those who commit crime against humanity. However, these punishments are to be carried out, under Divine sanction & authority, in a very remote world to come in the life hereafter. That is a metaphysical phenomenon & mind that those are only warnings & announcements!

Besides, there are some other punishments detailed in scriptures with reference to the worldly laws, to secure humanity against violence & organize a just society. This is what the every human made public & civil law does. Now, if to detail punishment in a law against any crime is to preach violence, then all states are preaching violence. The matter of the fact is that one cannot guarantee peace in life without laws & punishment.

In the Bible & the Qur'an, God is also presented as loving, forgiving and compassionate & paramount of mercy, who demands righteousness and justice in human affairs. Clear and unambiguous prohibition of killing is part of the Ten Commandments, and there are detailed provisions against social and economic violence in the form of relentless advocacy for justice, especially in favor of the poor and the oppressed. To kill a human being, according to Qur'an is equal to kill humanity.

The very first Ayah (verse) & the very first Surah (Chapter) of Qur'an starts with notion of mercy & beneficence of Allah. Qur'an verily mentions last of the Prophets, Muhammad (PBUH) as mercy for all the worlds.

Matthew presents Jesus an extra-ordinary preacher of non-violence: You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also... You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous... Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect(14).

3. The religion inspires aggressive missionary- ism. As a result, the social groups in different societies are organized that are living under a divine command to spread the faith, at any cost.

Does this missionary spirit incited with some ill will is the characteristic of only religion or this craze has shown its charismatic effects in

the so called Modernization, Westernization, New World Order & now the Globalization, as well?

John R. Hall rightly discloses the myth, concluding his elaborate study on the topic: Nonetheless, in various strands of historical development, religion is more than symbolic currency, more than epiphenomena, more than merely a venue of violence; it becomes a vehicle for the expression of deeply and widely held social aspirations -- of nationalism, anti-colonialism, or civilizational struggle(15). In fact, the argument ignores all manifestations of other evil spirited missions.

Cavanaugh opens this secret as the myth of religious violence helps create a blind spot about the violence of the putatively secular nation-state: We like to believe that the liberal state arose to make peace between warring religious factions. Today, the Western liberal state is charged with the burden of creating peace in the face of the cruel religious fanaticism of the Muslim world. ...this "clash of civilizations" worldview, in turn can be used to legitimate the use of violence against those with whom it is impossible to reason on our own terms. In short, their violence is fanatical and uncontrolled; our violence is controlled, reasonable, and often regrettably necessary to contain their violence(16).

4. Religion is absolutist; the claims of religions to absolute validity and to a consequent superiority have given the same human nature, sanctified violent aggression, exploitation, and intolerance.

The sanctity arousing absolutism is not only special trait of a religion; it is a hallmark of all colonial & imperialistic ideologies of the world. There is no reason to suppose that so-called secular ideologies such as nationalism, patriotism, capitalism, Marxism, and liberalism are any less prone to be absolutist, divisive, and irrational than belief.

Dr William Cavanaugh rightly says: We must conclude that there is no coherent way to isolate "religious" ideologies with a peculiar tendency toward violence from their tamer "secular" counterparts. So-called "secular" ideologies and institutions like nationalism and liberalism can be just as absolutist, divisive, and irrational as so-called "religion" (17).

The most important recent macro-level analysis by Charles Tilly and Jack Goldstone explains large-scale violence on the basis of collective action mobilized in relation to shared interests, undertaken by rationally motivated actors who take advantage of strategic opportunities. With the "cultural turn," a new wave of analysts has become interested in the role of ideology in mobilization and legitimation of social movements and revolutions(18).

Gultang contends the notion as: Inside the inner circle is what I call "soft" religion.........Religion is warm, compassionate, reaching out horizontally to

everybody, to all life, to the whole world without ifs and buts, reservations and exceptions(19).

Carolyn Marvin's book *Blood Sacrifice and the Nation* is a detailed analysis that the "Secular" nationalism of the kind we are currently witnessing can be just as absolutist, divisive, and irrationally fanatical as certain types of Jewish, Christian, Muslim, or Hindu militancy.

Concluding Remarks:

To conclude the arguments for and against the religion being the main source of violence I am of the opinion that religion is not the promoter of violence by its nature & core ideology but it can be misused to create violence. Moreover, there are some other vital reasons of violence to be discovered & to be brought to the light. It seems to me that actually the followers of a religion when charged with overwhelming urge of political & economic interests lead by a chauvinistic ruling elite invade any society, the religion is used as a tool as a motivating force. Otherwise, religion in itself is promoter of peaceful, compassionate & humane behavior in human beings.

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